Student musicians to showcase 'fusion' music

By Katie Navarra Bradley

If you haven't experienced the lively, upbeat tempo of "fusion" music, you'll have an opportunity to hear the musical genre at this year's Annual Convention and Education Expo. "Fusion" is a style that combines the elements of traditional and modern compositions and complex time signatures from non-Western music into one arrangement.

Members of the Arlington High School Philharmonia String Orchestra will perform selections featuring a "fusion" theme that blends fiddles and the string section from a classical orchestra.

"The selections we'll likely play will feature compositions that blend fiddle and classical music from composers around the world including, Finland, Ireland and the United States," said Jonathan Handman, music teacher and director, Arlington High School.

The 45-member string orchestra, which includes 10th through 12th graders, will perform prior to the keynote session headlined by Soledad O'Brien on Sunday, Oct. 18.

"Music is an important part of these students' lives and we will be able to demonstrate to school board members how much students benefit from these programs," Handman said.

The "fusion" theme is a popular one. The Niskayuna Central School District High School Jazz Ensemble also plans to perform selections that include "fusion," modern jazz funk, Count Basie style and Latin jazz.

Among performers will be an Oyster Bay-East Norwich band that received a "gold with distinction" award in a recent competition for exceptional skill in each of 26 categories.

Under the guidance of Ensemble Director David Fisk, the group of 20 high school students is scheduled to play during the Opening Reception held Sunday, Oct. 18. The experienced group of musicians from Schenectady County regularly performs at community events, and many of the students also play in select student jazz ensembles throughout the Capital Region.

"NYSSBA's Annual Convention is a wonderful venue to showcase our excellent jazz program. We are very excited and look forward to getting to work," said Fisk.

Convention attendees heading to the session featuring New York's new Education Commissioner, MaryEllen Elia, on Monday, Oct. 19, will have the opportunity to enjoy the Sixth Grade Advanced Band from James H. Vernon School in Nassau County's Oyster Bay-East Norwich school district.

In the spring, the group earned a coveted "gold with distinction" rating at the New York State School Music Association's Major Organization Festival. Ensembles participating in the annual NYSSMA festival are evaluated by state adjudicators and awarded a rating of bronze, silve or gold. A "gold with distinction" designation is given to ensembles that have demonstrated an exceptional level of technical and artistic skill in each of 26 evaluative categories for all three musical selections played.

Performing for NYSSBA will be a new challenge for the group. "This is the first time our school has participated in an event like this," said Joe Devassy, music teacher and director at James H. Vernon School. "It will be a wonderful opportunity for our students and the district."

"It is a real distinction for our students and gives us great pride to have our ensemble perform at NYSSBA's annual convention," said Peter Rufa, supervisor of fine and performing arts for Oyster Bay.

To perform at Convention, groups must go through a rigorous selection process overseen by music teachers affiliated with NYSSMA.

"Convention reinforces the importance of art and music programs in our schools, said Barry Entwistle, NYSSBA's director of leadership development and field services. "We are proud that, once again, this year's Convention will highlight some of the best school musical performers in the state."